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Towards an Understanding of the Israeli Context for Teaching and Learning

Vivien Marcow-Speiser

Lesley University has existed in Israel for nearly 30 years. Israel's 60th birthday in May 2008 offers an opportunity to assess some of the history and trends that have influenced its development. Israel is an extraordinary country with extraordinary accomplishments, as well as a complicated legacy of war, trauma, occupation and hardship. Nadav Tamir (2008) writing in the Boston Globe, sums up this state of affairs as follows:

Born into violence, these wars have left an indelible mark on the Israeli psyche, as well as on its image in the world. Israel is widely perceived of as a war ridden society. We are a land of ordinary people capable of extraordinary things. We are a land of innovators, visionaries, Nobel Prize winners, entrepreneurs, scholars, engaged citizens- and perhaps most pervasively of dreamers. ...We believe that peace is not only a moral imperative; it is the only realistic choice. (p. A15)

This paper will examine the impact of these 60 years as they affect the following domains: the intrapersonal domain, the interpersonal domain, the socio-cultural domain, 2 the political-institutional domain, and the spiritual domain. All of these aspects impact upon teaching and learning in the Israeli context. The intent in examining these domains is to look at some of the complexity involved in the teaching experience and is in no way meant to diminish the accomplishments and achievements of the Jewish State.

The Intrapersonal Domain

Throughout history the Jews have suffered persecution, and have lived with exile. Indeed, Jewish life came precariously close to extinction in this century. The state of Israel was founded out of the ashes of the Holocaust and has served as a refuge for immigrants who have been oppressed in other lands. The earlier ideals of the kibbutz movement, and the Socialist and Zionist founders of the State have given way to the force and imperatives imposed by years of occupation of conquered territories, a religious and settler Zionism that aims to encompass a "greater Israel". Israel has been besieged from within and without. Terror attacks, stone throwing, assassination, external attacks by vastly outnumbering forces, and the world press, have all contributed to deep-seated conflicts which are manifested both intrapersonally and interpersonally.

Emotions tend to live very close to the surface in this land. The survival issues and dangers are very present and very real here and survival panic can be mobilized in an instant. Sometimes it seems that the energy mobilized to deal with ordinary acts of living is very extreme. In the early years in and after the founding of the state, hundreds of thousands of Holocaust survivors immigrated to Israel. As these survivors raised their children, grandchildren and even great-grandchildren, the traumatic after-effects continue to reverberate throughout the generations.

In Jewish tradition there is a saying when a woman is pregnant that “it doesn’t matter if it’s a girl or a boy so long as there is a ‘bris’” (circumcision). Only boys are circumcised in Jewish tradition. The reality of the situation is that whether it is a boy or a girl she or he will serve in the armed forces. Since 1947 and the War of Independence, more than twenty thousand people have died in the armed forces and these losses are deeply mourned.

The native-born “Sabra” has been likened to the plant which is prickly outside and soft within. One wonders what price has been paid emotionally by Israelis for the internal and external travails that are a part of daily life in the region. Yaron Ezrachi (1997) writes about the “diminished power of the narrative” he encountered when faced with images of the intifada on television. He asks: “Can we go on binding our children to a narrative whose latest chapters seem to lose the thread of the story? And how does the Palestinian revolt and Israel’s violent response bear on our understanding of the earlier chapters of the story?” (p. 5).

This diminishment of the power of the narrative means that the ideals of Zionism must give way and a new narrative thread must emerge to lend coherence to the story. This story must find place for all of the individual voices including the voices of a society that is divided against itself. All voices must be expressed as they must be heard. The challenge then is for the individual to find and give voice to the most painful and deepest hopes and fears. And an equal challenge is in being able to listen to and hear the voices of others, particularly when these voices are in conflict and are saying things that nobody wants to hear. All this is a society where everybody has an opinion-where asking for simple directions will often lead to multiple and contradictory responses.

In order to understand the intrapersonal impact of the development of the individual, of the internal and external forces that have come into play these last sixty years, it is important to hear the voices of Jews and Arabs, Ashkenazi and Sephardi, secular and religious Jews, and immigrants and old-timers alike. Truly listening to viewpoints which may be discrepant might mean shifting paradigms and coming to understand the ways in which Israel may have been less than “a light unto the nations” that it aspired to be in keeping with ancient Jewish traditions. The interpersonal struggle of

these writers has been in holding and listening to the simple narratives of daily life, conflict and suffering that are part and parcel of the lives of our students and faculty alike.

The impact of the stresses that are inherent in living in Israel has taken its toll on the entire community. Both parents and children have had to struggle with the lack of certainty and ambiguities of dealing with the threats and realities of war, bombings and terror attacks. Since everyone in the society is subjected to high levels of stress, the intrapersonal and intrapsychic processes and development of the individual are impacted, and large segments of the population may be suffering from both short and long term effects of trauma.

The Interpersonal Domain

Interpersonal relationships in Israeli society have been tempered by conditions of peace and war, as well as economic, social, cultural, political and institutional factors. Israel has developed unique living configurations where individuals have had to learn to live cooperatively and collectively, both within the kibbutz movement, the army, and more recently in the settler enclaves of the West Bank.

One of the central conflicts in the interpersonal realm has been the conflict between diverging social tendencies, towards individualism or collectivism. Some of the central operant myths are breaking down. For example, the myth of collective Jewish suffering as symbolized in the Holocaust breaks down when Sephardic adolescents refuse to participate in Holocaust activities because they do not see themselves as affected by the Holocaust. Or, the myth of a commitment to democratic values breaks down in the evidence of practices of torture in the Israeli prisons.

It has been suggested by some that were there no external threat, Israeli society would break down into civil war, and riding the highways in Israel, one wonders whether or not it has already come to this. Yet, at the same time that interpersonal tensions on a daily level are palpable, the country will cleave together in crisis, suggesting that both individualism and collectivism are operating here.

Yehuda Amichai (1998) writing in the jubilee edition of *Ha'aretz* states what is fairly obvious when he says: "This is the only country we have." "And," he continues, "here in our own land...we live with the good and the bad. We don't sense the good because it seems obvious to us. We do sense the bad things that spoil the charms of this country every day and in all areas of life" (p. 38). It seems an ingrained facet of Israeli life that everyone notices the bad, and usually comments about it, and not so much attention seems to be paid to the good. This is a country where the term "no

comment” has no place in the interpersonal domain. Everybody has something to say. In such an interpersonal context one wonders whether anybody is listening.

In addition, there has been a transition from a value-based society as evidenced by the collective ideals of the founding figures to an individualistic society where the focus is more on personal and, in some ways, purely material advancement.

The Socio-Cultural Domain

Israeli society is a complex, dynamic and somewhat volatile mix of contrasting constituencies and viewpoints, and consists in large measure of groups who are both united and divided by difference. Some of the dynamics that tear at the social fabric are the social and cultural contrasts between groups that can become polarized including insiders/outsideers, Jews/Arabs, Secular/Orthodox, Ashkenazi/Sephardic and old-timers/ newcomers. These dynamics are constantly in flux, intensifying, and dissipating as the times dictate. For the purposes of this discussion, I will track patterns of immigration, and the relationships between Jews and Arabs, Secular and Orthodox Jews and Ashkenazic and Sephardic Jews.

Patterns of Immigration

The population of the country has increased sevenfold from the time of the declaration of statehood on May 14, 1948. According to the Central Bureau of Statistics, as quoted in Ha’Aretz of April 29, 1998, Israel’s population stood at 5,940,000, as compared to 806,000 in 1948. About 43 percent, or 2.7 million people, account for the increase in population due to immigration. According to the Jewish Virtual Library: “On the eve of 2008, Israel population reached 7.241 million residents. Of this figure, 75.6 percent are Jewish (5.472 million), 20% are Arab (1.449 million) and 4.4% (320,000) are ‘others’ — immigrants who are not registered as Jews in the Interior Ministry, non-Arab Christians and residents without religious classification” (“Israel turns 60”, 2008).

Calvin Goldscheider (1996) has identified four major streams of immigration as follows: The first period of mass immigration occurred between 1948-1951. In this period immediately following the war of independence and the establishment of the Jewish State, the Jewish population doubled in size as approximately 700,000 new immigrants arrived in Israel. The initial wave of immigration was of Ashkenazi (European) origin, primarily refugees and survivors of the holocaust, followed by a wave of Sephardi (Middle Eastern and North African) immigrants. According to Goldscheider, this period “established some of the basic contours of Israeli society, expanding major social, 8 political and cultural institutions, and the development and extension of the welfare entitlement system” (p. 52).

In the second period of immigration from the mid-fifties through sixties over half of the immigrants were of North African origin differing from the earlier immigrants with lower levels of education and fewer occupations.

The third period of immigration from the late sixties through the late eighties brought immigrants from Eastern Europe and Western countries. Israel was experiencing greater economic growth following the 1967 war and these immigrants had better access to immigrant services and resources than earlier immigrants. The six day war also raised consciousness, particularly in the eastern European countries, of Israel's power and strength; and, for many Russian Jews this became the turning point in their beginning to identify themselves as Jews, and wanting to immigrate to Israel.

The fourth period of immigration from 1989 until the present has brought significant numbers of Russians dubbed "the new masses" as well as numbers (approximately 100,000) of Ethiopian Jews, who had started to immigrate to Israel since the early eighties. Since Gorbachev opened the gates for Russian Jews to immigrate to Israel, more than 700,000 new immigrants have arrived in Israel. Unlike other immigrant groups, the Russians have organized themselves politically within a relatively short period of time and exert considerable influence on the country.

Considerable resources have been allocated to immigrant absorption over the years and Israel has succeeded in meeting housing, educational and other basic needs of immigrants throughout its history. The impact of successive waves of immigration over a period of fifty years has established enclaves of immigrant groups, who perceive of themselves as holding more or less power. Some groups have been able to mobilize themselves socially and politically, and some groups are still suffering from the effects and aftermath of persecution in their countries of origin and perceived privation since their arrival in Israel. Despite these differences, Jewish immigrants can claim automatic citizenship according to the Law of Return, and depending on their age, and religious preferences, are expected to serve in the armed forces. The schools and the army are considered to be the primary agencies of assimilation and immigrant Jews are expected to be absorbed into Israeli society.

Relationships between Arabs and Jews

The situation between Israeli Arabs and Israeli Jews is a complex and multilayered phenomenon. The Arabs who remained in Israel and did not flee to other Arab countries during the War of Independence, were included in the population census and were given Israeli citizenship. (There are some residual issues and difficulties that remain from this period where Arabs who had moved temporarily to a location other than their original location, or whose villages had been destroyed, have remained in an ambiguous situation in relationship to citizenship).

The Israeli Arab population in Israel has full citizen rights, though males do not serve in the Israeli army due to what is perceived as conflicting loyalties. The distinction between Israel's Jews and Arabs is made explicit in the identity document which all Israeli's carry on which Arab or Jewish nationality is listed. According to Goldscheider (1996): "Until 1966, Israeli Arabs lived under military administration within Israel and were confined to specific geographic areas, resulting in their sharp differentiation from the Jewish population" (p. 27). The Arab population has grown in size from 150,000 in 1948 to more than a million, a factor which is attributed to high fertility rates. Despite this growth, many Arab Israeli's consider themselves to be second class citizens. In assessing Israel's progress at fifty, the *Economist* of April 25, 1998 concludes that: "Israel has done too little for its Arab citizens. They have not been persecuted but their needs and aspirations have been neglected. As Muslims and Christians, they have been made to feel like an unwanted presence on the margins of a confessional state" ("How the other fifth lives, p. 17).

Relationships between Israeli Arabs and Jews are clouded by their history, under the shadow of military government, with practices of land appropriation and discriminatory policies and procedures being applied to Israeli Arabs. Tensions between the groups are exacerbated by inequalities in allocation of resources and ingrained prejudices on both sides.

In The Aftermath Of The Jubilee- Nakba Day

In striking counterpoint to Israel's Independence Day festivities, the Palestinians marked the Nakba, or the "catastrophe" on May 14, 1998, fifty years after the State of Israel was declared, signifying the time when the Palestinian people were forced to flee their homeland.

Peter Hirschberg (1998), in covering the event for the Jerusalem Report, describes this event as "The Palestinian's 50th anniversary, the negative of Israel's jubilee celebrations; the other side of the commemorative coin" (p.14). He describes how at 12 noon a siren was sounded throughout the West Bank and Gaza, reminiscent of the siren sounded in Israel on Holocaust Memorial Day. He also describes the crowds surging, the rocks and bottles beginning to be thrown.

Writing in *Ha'Aretz* on April 24, 1998, Josef Gorney expresses a common sentiment when he writes: "Any comparison between the Palestinian national catastrophe of 1948 and the great Jewish national catastrophe, the Holocaust is unacceptable. . . . The fact that hundreds of thousands of Arabs left or escaped from Palestine or were driven out by a Jewish army is in no way similar to the gassing and incineration of millions of Jews in the death camps" (p.10).

What is so poignantly highlighted in the Nakba demonstrations and their aftermath is the terrible tragedy of two peoples who both want the same land, and who have both suffered. Both parties are right to want what they want. The Jewish people want their homeland, as a safe haven against Jewish persecution, as their national and historical right. The Palestinians equally want and are entitled to a homeland.

Gorney (1998) looks at “nationalistic circles within the Israeli Arab community” who were planning to use Israel’s Independence Day as a time to commemorate their “catastrophe” and suggests that the only way out of the dilemma that Israeli Arabs face is when: “The Jewish majority in Israel will one day have to recognize the right of the country’s Arab citizens to civil equality and a cultural identity of their own. Before that can happen, however, Israeli Arabs will have to acknowledge that the Jews are not the only ones to be blamed for the Arab ‘Catastrophe’ of 1948” (ibid).

The Nakba demonstration held on May 14, 1998, led to rioting and to attacks on Israeli Defense Force soldiers in the West Bank and Gaza. As Israeli troops retaliated, 10 Gaza residents were reported in the press as being killed and 400 Palestinians were wounded in the disturbances. Yassir Arafat and the Palestinian Police were criticized in the Israeli Press for inciting the incident and for failing to keep the peace. The violence that erupted in the Nakba demonstration is tragic. It continues to perpetuate conflict and to impinge upon the peace process. It is unfortunate that such an event should come so close to the heel on Israel’s jubilee; however, it underscores the reality of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the need to find a peaceful solution to the conflict.

It is striking that 10 years later, as Israel reaches its 60th birthday, nothing much has changed for its Arab citizens since the jubilee celebration. In the intervening years the term Palestinian-Israeli’s has begun to replace Israeli Arabs.

According to the *Economist* of April 3, 2008,

To Palestinian-Israelis, on the other hand, to be the poorest group in a state that is Jewish in its symbols, holidays, ethos and historical narrative is not merely to be second-class citizens, or to be treated like immigrants in a country where they are actually natives. It is to be, in a way, non-persons. Unlike Jewish identity, a hardy blend of history, religion and culture that has survived two millennia of exile, Palestinian identity is a fragile thing, rooted largely in the land that they, their parents or their grandparents lost. (“How the other fifth lives”)

Writing in the *Jerusalem Post* on May 7, 2008, Ethan Bronner points out that “Arabs in Israel still feel adrift.” Even though Israel’s 1.3 million Arab citizens are better off and

better integrated than ever they still feel discriminated against and many of them feel that their primary identity is as Palestinians not Israelis.

Relationships between Secular and Orthodox Jews

Ultra-Orthodox Jews are not required to serve in the Israeli army and many ultra-Orthodox Jews who theologically believe that Jewish sovereignty over the land of Israel must wait until the coming of the Messiah do not recognize the existence of the Jewish state. They consequently do not pay taxes, although they do reap the benefits of the social and welfare systems. There is much resentment towards them on the part of secular Jews who do serve in the army and do pay taxes.

There are many religious Jews who do serve in the army, and who support a wide range of political opinion. However, the primary point of differentiation between secular and Orthodox Jews is in a difference in understanding of State and Halachic (traditional Jewish) law. Orthodox Jews hold Halachic law as superior to the laws of the state and since the religious parties have always constituted the swing vote in any election or building of political coalitions, they have influenced the civil administration of the country, particularly policies relating to birth, death and marriages. There is no civil marriage in Israel for Jews, and the very definition of who is recognized as a Jew is controlled by religious influences.

Secular Jews consider Orthodox Jews to wield disproportionate power over their lives in these matters, and in turn ultra-Orthodox Jews have taken to calling secular Jews, "Goyim (non-Jews) who speak Hebrew." There are organizations that support secular Jews in returning to traditional religious practice. In turn, there are organizations that support religious Jews in "returning to the questions" (i.e. the secular life). Secular and religious Jews live in very different worlds and the divide between them is very real.

This division was exacerbated in the settlement of the West Bank and areas of Gaza and Sinai by religious Zionists in the aftermath of the Six Day War and subsequent occupation of these areas. These settlers, particularly those living in the areas of Judea and Samaria, consider themselves to have returned to the Israel of biblical times, and are reluctant to yield these settlements in return for peace. The return of some of the settlements in Gaza created deep feelings and ruptures in Israeli society, which are yet to be healed.

Relationships between Ashkenazic and Sephardic Jews

According to Goldscheider (1996), in late 1948 there were 872,700 people living in Israel of which 82 percent were Jewish, and of which 85 percent were Ashkenazi. By

1992, the split between Ashkenazi and Sephardi was fifty-fifty. Although in terms of numbers there has been equalization, in terms of perceptions, historically, Ashkenazi Jews have been considered by Sephardim to have greater access to resources and power.

Horowitz and Lissak (1989) attribute this perception to the ways in which immigrants were initially absorbed and differentiate between a “first” (i.e. Ashkenazi) Israel and a “second” (i.e. Sephardi) Israel. They conclude as follows:

Thus, the Second Israel was placed in a distinctly peripheral role: not much was expected of them, nor was much given to them, at least, compared to the benefits enjoyed by the First Israel. This does not mean that the establishment denied the periphery a minimal standard of living or essential services. These were furnished but at a lower standard than those that were available to the first Israel. (p. 234)

The tensions between Ashkenazi and Sephardic Jews have been largely ameliorated through the processes of socialization through the schools and the army and through intermarriage. However, the feelings of divisiveness have also found expression through politics and the formation of political parties by Sephardic Jews, such as Shas, and issues continue to come to the surface. One such issue in April 1998, revolved around a statement made by the new Minister of Education, Yitzhak Levy, who spoke publicly about allocating more money to programs dealing with Sephardic culture, which he considered to have been previously neglected. This created a public outcry in the press where Levy was criticized for developing “cultural wars” rather than “cultural peace.”

The Political-Institutional Domain

Israel has dealt with successive waves of immigration and successive wars. The Sinai campaign and War of Attrition in the fifties, followed by the Six Day War in 1967, the Yom Kippur War in 1973, the Peace in Galilee operation in Lebanon in 1982, the Second War in Lebanon in 2007, the first Intifada from 1987-1992, and the Second Intifadah from 2000-present, have all taken their toll on the people and the country. “As of 2008, this Intifada has yet to be officially ended. The death toll, both military and civilian, over the entire period in question (2000-2008) is estimated to be over 5,300 Palestinians and over 1,000 Israelis” (Second Intifada).

In addition, numerous acts of terror, including bombings and hijackings, have been perpetrated against Israelis and other Jews both in Israel and in other countries. The political-institutional domain has been heavily influenced by the socio-cultural influences described in the preceding section and the inherent strains have found

expression through the establishment of political parties, coalitions and the political apparatus.

Following the War of Independence in 1949, Israel was faced with the task of nation building and immigrant absorption. This task was radically altered by the unanticipated occupation of territory in Sinai, the Golan Heights, the West Bank, and Gaza after the 1967 war. Israel assumed the burden of not only governing the citizens of its own sovereign state, but of imposing military control in the occupied territories. Horowitz and Lissak (1989) describe the drastic impact of this occupation and the difficulties it created when “a dual set of legal and political norms emerged in relation to the two populations living under Israeli control: a legitimate authority that rests on consensus, versus control based on coercion, and a population with full political rights, versus a population under foreign rule” (p. 233). Faced with international scrutiny for its policies in the occupied territories Israel could no longer claim its legacy as “a light to the nations.”

The occupation was also to give rise to a significant new force in Israeli politics of radical right wing settlers with the support and encouragement of the government who over the years have settled in areas of the West Bank. These settlers are currently supported by the Likud as well as by such political parties as Moledet, Tsomet, the National Religious Party, Gush Emunim, and Kach.

In addition to the problems created by the occupation, the country has had to struggle with the absorption of immigrant populations from Ashkenazi (European) origin as well as Sephardi (North African and Middle Eastern) origin. In addition, there have been continuing issues around inclusion of Israel's Arab population, as well as the more recent Ethiopian and Russian immigrations. These immigrations have led to political consequences that have played themselves out in the political as well as social arena.

The division between the Sephardic and Ashkenazi groups has over the years manifested itself electorally with a “tendency for immigrants of North African and Middle Eastern origin to vote for the Likud and the parties akin to it and for Ashkenazim to vote for the Alignment (Labor Party) and its satellite parties.” (Horowitz & Lissak, 1989, p. 235). The other groups who are impacting upon the current political picture in Israel include a number of smaller parties including religious parties and the Yisrael B'aliyah party founded by Russian immigrants. There are presently over 13 smaller parties that are represented in the Israeli Knesset (Parliament).

Ehud Sprinzak (1998) analyzes the political situation as a split in the country between “two largely ideological camps polarized over the future of the West Bank and the

Gaza Strip” (p. 19). He attributes the Oslo Peace Accord and the peace with Jordan to the 1992 election, which brought Rabin back into power. In the return of the Likud to power in 1996, new political players have entered into the political arena who are less invested in the territorial cleavages off the West Bank. He calls these parties the “soft” as opposed to the “radical” right and identifies this group as religious parties, including Agudat-Yisrael, Degel Ha’torah, Shas and the Russian party, Yisrael B’Aliyah. Sprinzak argues that “Unlike the Israeli right’s hard core, which is ready to fight for the land of Israel and to accept the concomitant sacrifices, most Israelis are opposed to spilling blood to keep the West Bank.....The soft right belongs to this majority. Ultra-Orthodox and Russian families of active duty and reserve soldiers are especially likely to resent any government that leads the nation into a costly military confrontation” (p. 28).

The political picture at 60 is very different than it was at the time of the declaration of independence. Sixty years of struggling internally and externally have taken their toll on the population and there are intense and bitter divisions. The Oslo Peace process, the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzchak Rabin, and the subsequent election of Bibi Netanyahu to power at that time, have been driven by socio-cultural and political-institutional forces that are deeply at odds with one another. The current Prime Minister Ehud Olmert of the Kadima Party is scheduled to step down in September and the political picture remains uncertain at the time of this writing. The country remains deeply divided and conflicted.

The Spiritual Domain

In the face of the overwhelming issues that tear at the fabric of Israeli society, there are forces at work here that move towards peace and peoples living in harmony with one another. Despite the constant bloodshed, despite all the battles that have been waged here in the name of religion, despite the blood that has soiled the land, governments and peoples have reached out hands to one another. Witness the peace with Egypt in the late 1970’s and the agreements with Jordan and the Palestinians in the early 1990’s.

As the author traveled throughout Israel and in the areas of the Palestinian Autonomy and Jordan over and over again I have heard of people’s desires for peace, despite the 20 deadlocked peace talks. I have heard both Israelis and Palestinians talking about the injustices perpetrated against them as have heard them say in one way or another: I am willing to swallow the injustices that have been done to me, or my parents, or my grandparents, because my desire for peace is that great.

There are deep wounds in this society, yet at the same time there is a dynamic at work in this area, which far transcends the boundaries of territoriality, and this is the area I

am calling the spiritual domain. This is the area that encompasses all people's hopes and all people's pain. This is the area that contains the cultural continuities and contradictions of the accumulated human experience. Here is where transformation and healing can take place. This then is the ground in which we do our teaching.

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